# Central American NEWSLETTER

Newsletter of the Central American Group of the Spanish Main Society.
Editor: Michael P. Birks, 36 Trevor Road, Flixton, Manchester M41 5QH. England. 0161 747 5924.

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The Central American Group is a part of the Spanish Main Philatelic Society, the leading Society in the world for collectors of Latin America. The journal of the SMPS is *The Mainsheet*, published quarterly, and is free with your subscription. The Secretary is Brian Moorhouse, PO Box 105, Peterborough PE3 8TQ, England. Phone 01733 2687078. The subscription is currently £8 in Europe or $20 elsewhere. Cheques in sterling or US$ should be made payable to "The Spanish Main". A three year subscription of £21/$54 and a five year subscription of £30/$80 are available and payment for these longer subscriptions may be made by Access, Mastercard or Visa. The minimum subscription is one year. If joining during the course of the year the appropriate part subscriptions should be added - Feb-Apr £6/$15; May-Aug £4/$10; Sep-Nov £2/$5 to pay through to the following January when the subscription paid will come into effect.

The Central American Group caters for the collectors of Mexico to Panama. Its journal, which you are now reading, is published quarterly, and is available by annual subscription. The subscription is currently £8/$15 resident in the UK or in Europe, or £12/$19 elsewhere. The minimum subscription is one year. If joining after June 1st, add 50% to pay through to the following January when the subscription paid will come into effect. Cheques in sterling payable to "The CA Group" should be sent to the treasurer, David Hankey, 2 Prince's Drive, Marple, Stockport SK6 6NJ, England. Phone 0161-449 0693. We shall be pleased to forward the relevant portions of multi-subscription cheques to the SMPS or the Chile Group for overseas members.

We regret we cannot accept dollar cheques for subscriptions because each cheque costs a minimum of £5/$8 to negotiate.

Back issues are available to members at 75p/$1.50 each, although Volumes 1 and 2 are sold out. Non-members may request a sample copy for 75p/$1.50 post paid. Requests for back issues should be sent the Editor, to whom cheques should be made payable. Payments must be made in sterling or in dollar bills.

The group leader is Richard Saundry, Gwrych Cottage, Godstone Road, Bletchingley, Redhill, Surrey RH1 4PL, England. Phone 01883 742186.

The group does not run a packet. The SMPS Packet Secretary is Brian Sylvester, 3 Russell Court, St Lukes Road, Maidenhead, Berkshire SL6 7AP, England. Phone 01628 784555.

Although most packets are of a general nature, there are occasional specialised one country packets. Good and unusual material is always wanted.

Owing to insurance difficulties, the packet is not available to overseas members, although we shall be pleased to accept material for inclusion from them.

The auctioneer of the SMPS is Brian Moorhouse, to whom Auction and Private Treaty lots should be sent. Brian is a dealer, and will include your name on his mailing list if requested to do so.

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**Vol.IV, No. 79** **<mpbirks@36trevor.freeserve.co.uk>** **April 2000**

## EDITORIAL

The looked for response at the AGM was not forthcoming and John West summed it up well in his editorial in Chile News. I reproduce it here since it applies equally to us.

> I now come to the serious bit about the future of our society. The last meeting was held in the Victory Services Club on 4th December 1999. It was disappointing in that only ten members turned up for this final meeting of the 2nd Millenium. It was the Spanish Main Cup and as we had invited overseas members to participate by post we found ourselves with 13 entries but only 10 voters. I have to say that I, as winner of the Cup last year, was ineligible to enter and so was able to look around with an unbiased eye. The standard was high and covered a wide range of Latin American interest. Members present were allowed a single vote (not for themselves) and the result fortunately gave us a winner without a re-vote. There were 3 votes for the winner, 2 votes for the two runners up and three entries with one vote each. This seems a poor way to conduct the prestigious Cup award. We will have to think again for some new way of judging next year if the attendance is to remain so poor.
>
> The winner was Hamish Reid with his 16 pages on the 1910 ABNCo. Presidents Die Proofs and Specimen stamps. The competition was so good that I will write more about it in the next issue. However one item was a proposal from Hamish that in future past winners should not be eligible to vote. This would encourage more newcomers to try. Past winners could show at the meeting to widen the exhibition but not be a part of the competition. Would members please let me know what they think.
>
> Much time was devoted at the AGM to discussing the future of the meetings. It was the last meeting at which Hamish would be responsible. No other member of the ten present was prepared to undertake the organisation of future meetings. At an average of nine members per meeting and at a cost to the Society of £60 for four hours the system is not viable.
>
> The original idea of holding a meeting at STAMP 2000 in May costing £150 for three hours had to be cancelled. So the only meeting left in the diary is the AGM and Spanish Main Cup next December 2nd. This has already been booked so please make a note even if it is so long off!

Looking at the list of dates below you will notice that the ABPS sponsored show GLASGOW 2000 is being held later this year. What is not so well known is that the next one will be CHESTER 2002 and I am organising the competitive displays. Several changes from Glasgow will be made and these will be published after that show. However for your information the Open Class will not place a figure on the amount of philatelic material being displayed – indeed none need be displayed as long as there is a "postal" (in its broadest sense) element *i.e.* 100% telegram forms would be acceptable. In a pioneering spirit we are introducing a Research Class where the accent will be on the quality of the research and not the stamps themselves. A good Machin display could beat 1d blacks in this class as there will be no category of "importance" here or in the Open Class. Specialised Societies will be mailed immediately after Glasgow.

And finally, the next issue will complete Volume 4 and you will be pleased to know that a complete index of the four volumes is in preparation and will be included with that issue.

**mpb**

*Dates for your diary*

London 2000 (World), 22-28 May 2000.

Glasgow 2000 (National), 17-19 November 2000.

# NICARAGUA: THE FIRST INTERIOR AIR MAIL FLIGHTS

(Part 1)

by Dr NEAL WEST

(President of the *Nicaragua Study Group* of the United States)

Harry E. Huber's authoritative report on the first inland air mail service between Managua and the towns of Ocotal, Esteli, Matagalpa and Jinotega, using the planes of "Transportes Aereos Centro-Americanos" or "TACA", which appeared in the 21 January 1933 issue to *Weekly Philatelic Gossip* (pp 1392-1396) is reproduced opposite. Huber provided a very complete description of the contract between the Nicaraguan government and the airline company, the decree authorising the overprinting of the 1929 1 córdoba vermilion air mail stamp (SG 633; Scott C6) to produce an 8 centavo inland air mail stamp (SG 693; Scott C31), the stamp surcharge varieties created in the overprinting process and the cachet produced to commemorate the first flights.

SG 693 / Scott C31

The vagaries of weather, however, intervened and the announced date of the first flight, 12 October 1932, chosen to coincide with the 440th Anniversary of the "discovery" of America by Christopher Columbus, was not propitious. Huber states that because of fogs and heavy rains the flight to Ocotal and Esteli was delayed until Tuesday 18 October. Huber's covers to Esteli had an October 18 arrival mark and his covers to Ocotal had an October 12 arrival mark. The landing fields at Matagalpa and Jinotega were still flooded in late October and Huber expressed uncertainty in his *Weekly Philatelic Gossip* report over whether the first "air" mail that eventually arrived at Matagalpa and Jinotega in mid-November was flown in or sent by the ordinary overland route.

The covers to these later two destinations had arrival marks dated November 15 (Matagalpa) and November 16 (Jinotega). Huber preprinted and reprinted most of the same information contained in his *Weekly Philatelic Gossip* report in three shorter, abridged reports which appeared in *Mekeel's Weekly Stamp News* for 12 September 1932, 21 November 1932 and 8 May 1933. In the last of these, appearing after the *Weekly Philatelic Gossip* report, Huber stated categorically that "the accumulated air mail for these two towns [Matagalpa and Jinotega] was sent by ordinary overland route".

Finally, in a 22 April 1933 article in *Weekly Philatelic Gossip* (p133), Huber states that "The [inland air mail ] service was more or less disturbed during November [1933], because of a revolution in Honduras; at times the planes were commandeered by Government forces and at others by the rebels.

### 20. Interior Air Mail Service Inaugurated, October, 1932

On July 16, 1932, a contract was signed by the Ministro de Fomento y Obras Publicas (Antonio Flores Vega) and C. C. Hughes, representing the Vias Aereas Nacionales, S.A. of Tegucigalpa, Republic of Honduras, for the transport of passengers and mails between Managua and the capital towns of the Departments of Matagalpa, Esteli, Nueva Segovia and Bluefields, and the towns of El Sauce and Puerto Cabezas. President Moncada's signature was attached to the contract on the same day.

According to clause 11 of the contract, special inland air mail stamps were to be provided for this service, and the proceeds deposited in a special account, from which payment was to be made monthly, to the company, for the air mails transported. For the carriage of correspondence by air the contractor was to receive (clause 10), $1.25 per net pound of 480 grs., and 50c. per net pound for parcels and packets.

Formal inauguration of the inland air mail service between Managua and the towns of Ocotal, Esteli, Matagalpa and Jinotega, by planes of the Transportes Aereos Cento-Americanos, was announced on October 11th, for the following day.

The service is twice weekly, the plane leaving Tegucigalpa, Honduras at 8 a. m. on Monday and Thursday, for Managua, via Ocotal, Esteli, Matagalpa and Jinotega; and returning from Managua, on Tuesday and Friday. Mails are not carried to or from Tegucigalpa, as these (exterior) air mails are flown by planes of the Pan American Airways, Inc., over F.A.M. route 5, service on which was inaugurated north from Managua on May 15, 1929, and south, to Cristobal, on the following day.

### 21. 8c. On C$1. Inauguracion Interior, Issued October 12, 1932

On October 11, 1932, President J. M. Moncada, signed decree No. 8 (printed in La Gaceta - Diario Oficial No. 219, of Thursday, October 13, 1932), authorizing the preparation of an 8c. inland air mail stamp, by overprinting, appropriately, 2000 of the C$1. vermilion, exterior air mail stamp, Momotombo type.

The C$1. ($1. U. S. currency) Momotombo air mail stamp, was line engraved and recess printed by the American Bank Note Co. of New York, in sheets of 100 (10x10), unwatermarked, and perforated single line 12. In the upper margin of the sheet over the 8th vertical row, is F-8979. Three denominations in this type, 25c., 50c. and C$1 were placed on sale December 15, 1929; the 15c. and 20c. issued July 7, 1931, were first used on air mails dispatched north on July 8th.

Like the 15c. Semana Correo Aereo of September 17, 1932 (of which only 1000 stamps were overprinted), sheets of 100 of the C$1 were halved vertically, and overprinted in black by the Imprenta Nacional, Managua, in three lines, "Inauguracion Interior - 12 Octubre 1932 - Vale C$ 0.08" (caps for the initial letters only), measuring 29½, 23 and 20½ mm., respectively, with a vertical overall measurement of 11 mm.

In the setting of 50, the second "u" of "Inauguracion" on Nos. 27 and 30 is inverted; on No. 44 the first "0" of "0.08" is dropped, and on No. 46, the date appears incorrectly as "1232."

The overprinted 8/C$1 stamp was placed on sale at Managua only, on October 12, 1932.

**October 12, 1932.** Correo Aereo—two United States Marine Corps planes over Momotombo; line engraved and recess printed by American Bank Note Co. of New York; unwatermarked, and perforated single line 12; overprinted in black in three lines, by the Imprenta Nacional, Managua, "Inauguracion Interior - 12 Octubre 1932 - Vale C$ 0.08."
**8c. on C$1 vermilion (1000).**
a. Second "u" of "Inauguracion" inverted, Nos. 27 and 30.
b. First "0" of "0.08" dropped, No. 44.
c. "1232" for "1932"—No. 46.

### 22. First Dispatches Interior Air Mails, October 18, 1932

For the inaugural air mail, which consisted of 253 letters and 15 parcels, a special cachet was provided, and applied in violet—a horizontal rectangle, 72x40 mm., inscribed "Primer Envio Aereo Postal - Interior - (plane) - Managua, Nic."—the postmark, also in violet, is a horizontal rectangle, 43x35 mm., "Correo Aereo - OCT 12 1932 - Managua, Nic." in three lines. Registered matter (3c. additional) received an additional marking of "Certificados, Managua, Nic. C.A." between two concentric circles 34 and 26 mm., with a plane in the center (nose to top), and "12.10.32" on the wings.

Although announced for formal inauguration on October 12, 1932, the 440th anniversary of the discovery of America by Columbus, because of fogs and heavy rains, the inaugural air mails for Ocotal and Esteli were not flown until Tuesday, October 18. The landing fields at Matagalpa and Jinotega were still under water at the end of the month, and consideration was being given to dropping these inaugural mails by parachute. There seems to be some doubt as to whether the air mails (inaugural) for these two towns were held over until conditions improved at the landing fields, or was sent by ordinary overland route.

Letters for Esteli franked with the Inauguracion 8/C$1 stamp, specially cacheted and postmarked October 12, 1932, were backstamped October 18, 1932; those for Ocotal, through misunderstanding of instructions, were backstamped October 12, 1932 (although flown only on the 18th), while letters for Matagalpa and Jinotega were backstamped November 15 and November 16, 1932, respectively.

Inauguration of air mail service to the east coast, i. e., Bluefields, Puerto Cabezas, etc., awaits the arrival of a hydroplane from the United States.

Of the 15 parcels franked with the 8/C$1 Inauguracion stamp, 7 were addressed to Jinotega (postage $15.30), 5 to Ocotal ($7.40), 2 to Esteli ($2.30), and 1 to Matagalpa ($1.75).

**October 18, 1932.** Inauguration of inland air mail service from Managua to Jinotega, Matagalpa, Esteli and Ocotal. Delayed by rain and fogs and did not leave until October 18 (Esteli and Ocotal) or November (Matagalpa and Jinotega).
Cacheted, in violet, horizontal rectangle, 72x40 mm., inscribed "Primer Envio Aereo Postal - Interior - plane - Managua, Nic."
Postmarked, in violet, hor. rectangle, 43x35 mm., "Correo Aereo - OCT 12 1932 - Managua, Nic." in 3 lines; if registered, additionally, "Certificados, Managua, Nic. C.A. between two concentric circles, 34 and 26 mm., in center plane with nose to top, and "12.10.32" on wings.
Rate: Letters, 8c per 15 gr., registration 3c. additional.
Parcels: 25c. per 400 gr.
Printed matter: 1c. per 40 grs.
Total mail carried: 253 letters and 15 parcels.

Managua to Esteli.
Backstamped, in violet, double lined circle, 31 mm., "Correos de Nicaragua - Esteli" date in 3 lines in center "OCT - 18 - 32" and four horiz. bars at right.

Managua to Ocotal.
Backstamped, in violet, single lined circle, 31 mm., "Correos y Telegrafos de Nicaragua - Ocotal," date "OCT - 12 - 1932." three lines in center, and four horiz. bars at right.

Managua to Matagalpa.
Backstamped, in violet, double lined circle (outer line serrated) 30 mm., "Correos de Nicaragua - Matagalpa," date "15 - NOV - 1932." three lines in center, and four horiz. bars at right.

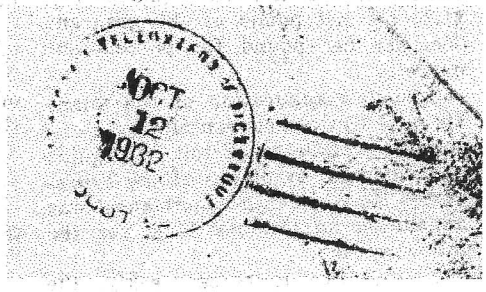
Managua to Jinotega.
Backstamped, in violet, single lined circle 32 mm., "Correos de Nicaragua - Jinotega," date "16 - NOV - 1932" in center in three lines.

Copy of the Huber report which appeared in the 21 January 1933 issue of *Weekly Philatelic Gossip*.

Part of the enjoyment and fascination with collecting covers is that by accumulating a number of them and examining them closely the history surrounding their usage sometimes emerges. It is unclear from Huber's reports how many covers from these first interior air mail flights he had at his disposal. Over the years I have accumulated many covers from these "12 October 1932" first flights and a number of members from the Nicaraguan Study Group (NSG) have kindly provided photocopies from their collection. In addition I have illustrations of a number of these covers which were offered at auction and an article by Richard Cone; a total of thirty-nine examples available for this study.

Six different senders of covers for the "12 October" flight are represented in the accompanying figures. I can verify, based on covers/photocopies examined, that only one of the senders, whom I speculate is Ernesto Hammer, sent covers to all four towns, although it seems likely that they all did. Three of the senders, Raphael Gonzalez, José Marín Zelaya M and the cover from "Direccion General de Communicaciones" had only official stamps; the other three senders, Lieutenant Carl McPherson, "Hammer" and "Unknown" properly franked their covers with SG 693; Scott C31 and an additional 3 centavos for domestic registration, where appropriate.

All six examples of the first flight covers to Ocotal that I have seen have the same 12 October 1932 circular arrival mark on the reverse (illustrated right)




Backstamp from figure 1 (below)

Figure 1. Registered first flight "Hammer" cover from Managua to Ocotal. [Kay Rasmussen]
Front: Violet rectangular first flight cachet. 12 October 1932 circular registered air mail and rectangular Managua air mail cancellations. Rectangular Managua and Ocotal registration cachets; both filled in. Franked with SG 693, 617 and 618.
Reverse: 12 October 1932 circular Ocotal arrival mark (illustrated) and blank Ocotal registration cachet.

For no apparent reason the cover illustrated (figure 1) has strikes of the Ocotal registration marking on the front and on the back although only the one on the front has been filled in. I infer, based primarily on type style, that these covers with this style of address and typing which were sent to all four destinations, were prepared by Ernesto Hammer (see *Nicarao*, Vol.6, No.1, 1 Oct. 1995, pp.2-4 for Aldo Knoepffler's interesting article about Hammer). One of the most significant features on which this speculation about Hammer is based is found by examining the capital letter "A" on the covers which almost always have a heavier right "foot" on the letter; this feature matches the "A" found on many Hammer covers from the same era (which also have his return address).

Another virtually constant characteristic of the Hammer covers with his return address, in my collection of over thirty examples, is that he underlined with his typewriter (in red ink usually) the city (and often the State) name in the address (The covers in Figures 1, 3, 6 and 10 in this article show this identical feature). Why these 12 October 1932 first flight covers would have been sent by him without his usual return address, used on many covers both before and after this period, is unknown.

A second cover to Ocotal from "Hammer", in this author's collection, has both Managua and Ocotal registration cachets on the front (both filled in) but it lacks the (probably erroneous) Ocotal registration mark on the reverse shown in figure 1. A third cover to Ocotal from "Hammer", illustrated in the 30 November 1993 Wilshire auction catalogue, also features both the Managua and Ocotal registration marks on the front, properly filled in, plus the stamp is the "Inaugnracion" variety (SG 693a; Scott C31b).

Another registered cover to Ocotal, which does not have the additional Ocotal registration cachet is illustrated below as figure 2.

Figure 2. Registered first flight (ex McPherson) cover from Managua to Ocotal. [Michael Birks]
Front: Violet rectangular first flight cachet. 12 October 1932 circular air mail registered and rectangular Managua air mail cancellations. Franked with SG 693 and 3 x 617. Reverse: (not shown) circular Ocotal arrival mark for 12 October 1932.

The sender of this cover to Marine Captain Baker in Ocotal is Carl McPherson a US Marine and philatelist stationed in Managua, whose philatelic accomplishments were the subject of a previous article (*Nicarao*, Vol.6, No.2, 1 Jan. 1996, pp.15-19). I have a virtually identical cover, also from McPherson to Ocotal (not illustrated) which also bears only the Managua registration mark.

The three "Hammer" covers are addressed to the postmaster whilst the two McPherson covers are addressed to specific individuals in Ocotal. Thus the "Hammer" covers may have contained a return label or have been enclosed in an envelope and may have been "re-registered" for return (but without an additional registration fee currently visible).

All ten "12 October" first flight covers to Esteli available for examination have 18 October 1932 Esteli arrival marks. The air mail stamp on the "Hammer" cover, illustrated as figure 3, has the variety "dropped first 0" on the 25 centavos stamp.

Figure 3. Registered first flight "Hammer" cover from Managua to Esteli.
Front: Violet rectangular first flight cachet. 12 October 1932 circular air mail registration and rectangular Managua air mail cancellations. Franked with SG 693 (dropped "0" variety), 617 and 467.
Reverse: (not shown) 12 October 1932 circular registration air mail cancellation and circular 18 October 1932 Esteli arrival mark.

The official cover from "Direccion General De Communicaciones" to Esteli, illustrated as figure 4, has the much less obvious variety "OFIAIAL" on the 25 centavo stamp (SG O689; Scott CO5). This latter cover is the only example from this sender that I have seen.

Huber states that the "12 October" first flight covers to Matagalpa have 15 November 1932 arrival marks. I have examined eight covers to Matagalpa; the only official one examined has a 17 November arrival mark (figure 5), but another cover (a "Hammer") has both one strike dated 15 November and two strikes dated 17 November of the arrival marks.

[Matagalpa will be concluded, along with Jinotega, in Part 2)

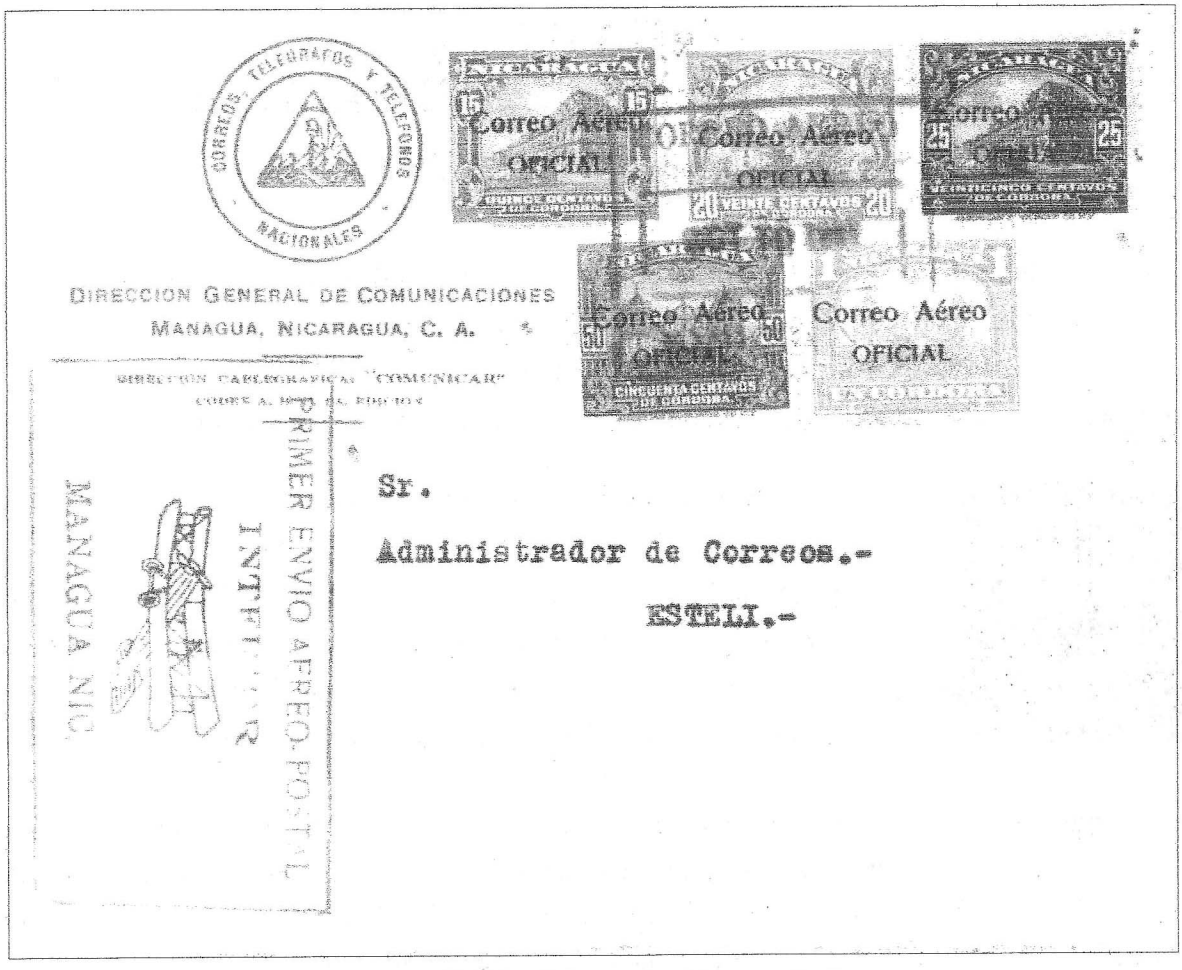



Figure 4. Official first flight cover from Managua to Esteli.
Front: Violet rectangular first flight cachet. 12 October 1932 rectangular Managua air mail cancellation.
Franked with SG O688-692. SG O690 is the "OFIAIAL" variety. Reverse: (not shown) 18 October 1932 circular Esteli arrival mark.

Figure 5. Official first flight cover from Managua to Matagalpa.
Violet rectangular first flight cachet.
12 October 1932 circular Managua air mail cancellation. Franked SG O689.
Reverse: (inset) 17 November 1932 circular Matagalpa arrival mark.

*to be continued on page 234*

# COSTA RICA:
# THE 1924 "STEAMER – LOCOMOTIVE" FANTASIES

by RICHARD H SAUNDRY

Responding to Michael Round's letter (last issue, page 212) I can assure him that his stamp and a number of related overprinted stamps created by overprinting the 1 ctmo value of the 1910 ABNCo issue (SG 77, Scott 69: *N.B.* the basic stamp was one of a set issued in 1910, not 1909 as the date inscribed thereon would imply) are very well known by most Costa Rican collectors.

I enclose a photocopy of one such overprinted stamp in my collection – the 1 ctmo Colon train "inverted" overprint variety. Such stamps, overprinted in green and bearing the date "1924" are fantasies and were made to defraud unwary collectors. They had no franking validity whatsoever. Examples found on bogus covers have been known to fool even the most eminent of collectors.

Specialist catalogues do describe the "steamer – locomotive" overprints, the "airmail" overprinted fantasies and the earlier "Almirante" overprinted stamps (for instance see the Costa Rica Postal Catalogue [1st Edn. 1994] Hector R Mena, Editor, page N12). The Saenz catalogue (1978) describes and illustrates the "Almirante" overprints which were created by Costa Rican troops during the occupation of Almirante, Panama, in 1921. Some "Almirante" stamps went through the posts and bear Sixaola, Costa Rica, cancellations but were unofficially accepted for postage at that location.

Stamps with the 1924 airplane design were made in Chicago by a philatelist and apparently given away at a philatelic convention. Such airplane fantasies were made by surcharging the 1 ctvo stamps with "Correo 1924 Aereo" in a box with a plane. Overprinting was made in different colours, including green, using a plate of 5 x 2 subjects comprised of 8c, 16c, 32c, 64c and 1 Colon values. Students of Cost Rican aerophilately will readily agree that these surcharge values do not correspond with any known contemporary postage rate.

In 1986 Hal T Edwards (*Oxcart*, Vol.104, pp97-98) wrote a short article on the Costa Rican "Steamer – Locomotive" fantasies and illustrated a "flown" cover with a strip of five of these stamps comprised of one each of the complete surcharged set (a) 5 ctmos and (b) 10 ctmos se-tenant, (c) 25 ctmos, (d) 50 ctmos and (e) 1 Colon showing inverted surcharge. (*N.B.* a se-tenant pair of 1 Colon stamps exists showing inverted overprints of the steamer on the left stamp and the locomotive on the right stamp so possibly all five denominations exist showing either locomotives or steamers *i.e.* ten possible fantasy stamps). The 5 and 25 ctmos stamps on the cover showed a steamer, whilst the remaining values showed a locomotive. Interestingly this bogus flight cover with stamps neatly cancelled with the double circular date stamp "SAN JOSE – LIMON / MAYO / 1o / 1924 / CORREO AEREO" (bogus type of postmark) made its way into the 1950 edition of the American Air Mail Catalogue and was given full catalogue listing (No.3) in the Costa Rican section of the chapter dealing with Pioneer Airmails.

How such a fraudulent cover could have fooled the compilers of what is usually regarded as the "reference bible" for aero-philatelists remains a mystery: the compilers of this edition of the AAMC were apparently entirely ignorant of even the basics relating to Costa Rican aerophilatelic history. There were no airmail flights in Costa Rica in May 1924: the first flood emergency flights between San José and Puerto Limón only took place between 5th and 13th January. The 1st May 1924 listing for Costa Rica was dropped from the AAMC after the 4th edition of 1971. In issue 107 of "Oxcart" a second bogus flight cover was illustrated showing all five fantasy stamps but here the 25 ctmos and 50 ctmos stamps were se-tenant. Once again the 1 Colon value appeared as the inverted overprint variety: I believe the 1 Colon stamps are not known with "normal" overprints.

If I may be permitted the luxury of relating one anecdotal incident I witnessed – I was in attendance at a Spanish Main Philatelic Society auction some twenty or so years ago when one of the "locomotive" fantasies was on offer. I well remember the gasps of amazement from the back of the room as the price this stamp commanded that day far exceeded the estimate of c£35 and if memory serves me right it went for £60 or thereabouts to a dealer. At the next auction an identical stamp sold for £3. I well remember the look of thunder on the dealer's face. In any event we all had a smile at his expense which made the supping of beer at the bar that day an even more convivial experience.

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Michael Round, whose query prompted Richard Saundry's reply, sends a copy of the entry in *An Airpost Collectors Notebook.*

AN AIRMAIL COLLECTOR'S NOTEBOOK 45

## COSTA RICA

**1921.** SEMI-OFFICIAL VIGNETTE FOR EXPERIMENTAL FLIGHT between San Jose and Managua. It ended in failure, and the air mail was forwarded from Puerto Limon by ordinary route. Lithographed. Ungummed. Unwatermarked. Serrated roulette 13½. The experiment was not followed up. Some 600 examples were sold from the central Post Office.

1 Colon green and yellow. IMPERFORATE with wide lower margin. Uncatalogued.

**1924.** EMERGENCY AIR SERVICE BY U.S. AEROPLANES LOANED TO COSTA RICA DURING SUSPENSION OF RAILWAY COMMUNICATIONS BETWEEN SAN JOSE AND PUERTO LIMON.

INTERESTING PANE OF 25 MINT STAMPS OVERPRINTED IN RED WITH AN AEROPLANE and "CORREOS AEREO 1924." The following values—8 cts., 16 cts., 32 cts., 64 cts., and 1 Colon, the lowest value appearing on the right, and the highest on the left of each normal strip. The three top rows have the surcharge inverted.

***Note***

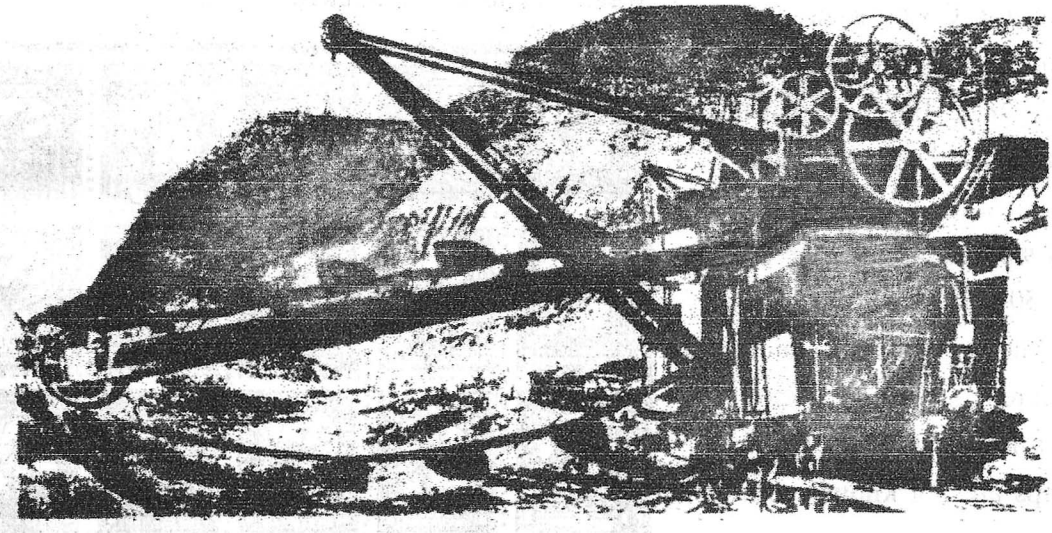
Various "Freak" overprints indicating AIR MAIL on contemporary stamps appeared during this period, but it is doubtful whether they were ever used postally. Champion mentions them under "SEMI-OFFICIALS" as a series of five values never used for the Air Post.

# MAILS ACROSS THE ISTHMUS 1840-1955 - Part 6

from an unknown source

In May 1869 the last tie of the Union Pacific Railroad was laid at Promontory Point, Utah – and the echo of the hammer that drove the golden spike could be heard all the way to Panama, over 3,000 miles away, tolling the bells and signaling the death knell of the greatest prosperity ever enjoyed by a railroad. After 1869 only occasional letters passed through Panama between the US east and west coasts. Most of the mails at this time were those which originated in South or Central America and were destined for Europe.

From 1881 to 1904 the French were engaged in their unsuccessful effort to construct a canal. Control of the railroad passed into their hands at this time but it continued under American management. Very little of postal interest was produced during these years. The railroad, since it was not acting as a route agent, did not deal with loose letters which might require markings such as are often seen on C19th and early C20th US mails.



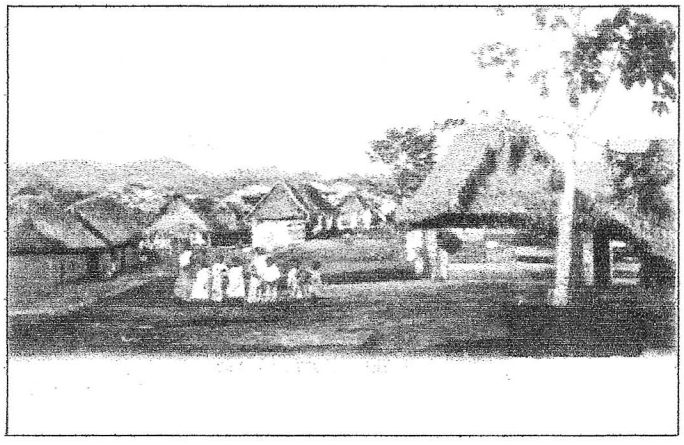
The French used bucket excavators such as this machine at work in Culebra cut.

However, the US purchase of the French assets at Panama for $40m in early1904 and the signing of a treaty with the new Republic of Panama leading to the establishment of the Canal Zone later that same year also ushered in a new era for the railroad – and philatelists.

The final chapter in the tale happened during those years the Americans governed the Canal Zone. There were letters by the thousands from the many new workers who flocked to the Isthmus to make that dirt fly. There were no roads uniting the two coasts and in fact there would be none until 1943. To meet the obvious need a postal service was established as one of the first acts of the new regime. 24 June 1904 marked the first day of the new service, and in conjunction with this a "mail messenger" was assigned to each coast-to-coast train. He was not, however, a route agent who marked letters passed up to him at each stop; in fact, he could only accept mails at the intermediate stops that came from the branch post offices which were springing up.

His sole task was to take these mail pouches and deliver them at Cristobal on the Caribbean side or Ancon at the Pacific terminus. The exact date of establishment of a Railway Mail Service in the Canal Zone is not known but it must have been in early January 1905.

28 June 1909,
"The Americans are making great changes here owing to the canal".



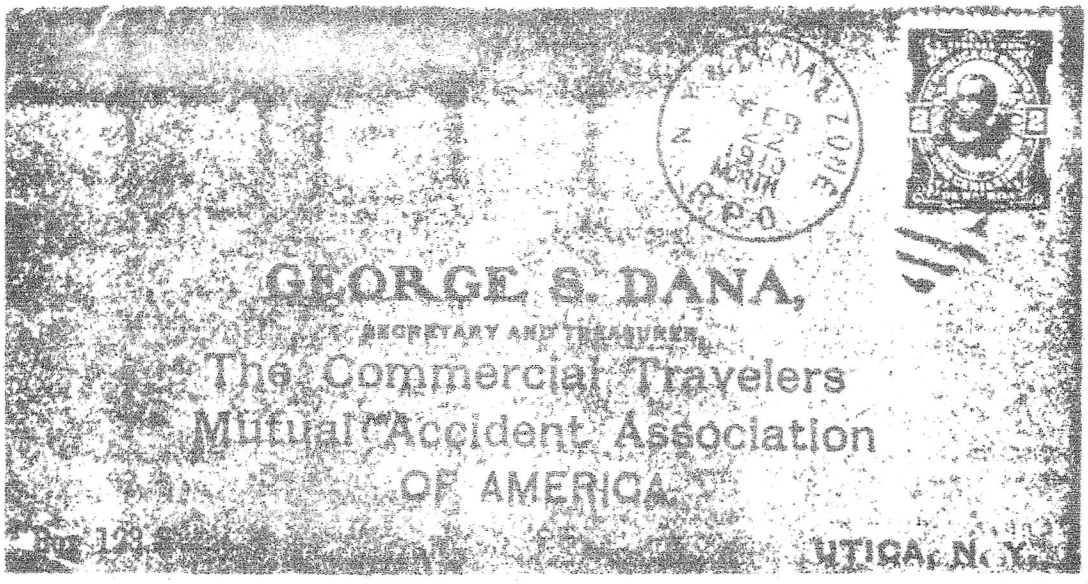
Cartagenita Village at Empfire

A wide variety of cancels were used through the years and a nice display of railroad material from this period is within the reach of most collectors. Lawson Entwistle, in his monumental work *Postal Markings of the Canal Zone* notes that "each train carried the usual mail car with clerk(s) who would receive, cancel and sort mail. The even numbered trains traveled north (Ancon-Cristobal) and the odd numbered, south. There were four regular first-class trains each way daily, numbered 2 to 9, inclusive. When the railroad relocation (1909) on the easterly side of the canal was in full operation, there still remained a shuttle line that continued to operate on the westerly side. The shuttle trains, numbered 32 to 39, also carried a mail car and cancellations with these numbers are rare ..... special trains to make boat connections and others for sightseeing excursions were also run. It is said that some of these trains also carried a mail car that used special numbers".

This would explain an occasional odd number noted on covers or postcards. The Panama Railroad even ran the steamers connecting the Gulf and Atlantic ports with the Canal Zone. This was authorised as early as 1907, when the US Post Office Department agreed to the establishment of a Railway Post Office service on Panama railroad steamers operating between New York and the Canal Zone. A1907 letter quoted by Judge Tatelman in his standard work *Canal Zone Postage Stamps* says: "... the mails from New York (US mails) for the Canal Zone per the Panama Railroad Line are received by sea postal clerks on board the steamers of the line in New York, who run regularly between New York and Cristobal, and in whose charge the mail remains until it is delivered by them to the Postmaster at Cristobal. These mails are worked by the postal clerks on the boats for the various post offices in the Canal Zone".

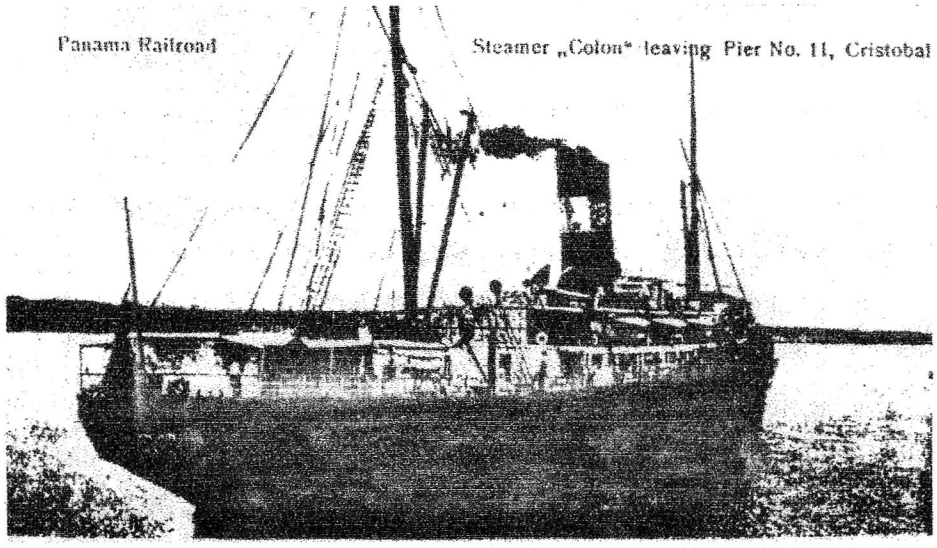
What this means is they sorted the mail destined for each Canal Zone town so it would be ready for delivery when the ship docked. They also handled letters and postcards written on board and turned these over at the dockside. It is these covers which are of greatest interest to collectors for they can turn a very common stamp into a choice and highly collectible item.

Northbound covers are normally found with Canal Zone stamps while their southbound cousins have US issues. Note too that in the centre of these canceling devices there is a place for a logo reading "NORTH" or "SOUTH". While the ship's name is not included in the cancel it is relatively easy to learn which ship actually carried a given letter because the shipping schedules are known.




It is strange to sea an "RPO" cover travelling by sea.
Covers from northbound voyages from Cristobal to New York and later to New Orleans are much more common than southbound trips.

The sea post service ended prior to WWII but the railway mail service continued on the railroad. The consolidation of activities following WWII signaled the end of the railway mail service. The towns within the Canal Zone were concentrated in the vicinity of the terminal cities and the construction day towns were but memories. The highway made rapid connections possible at any time and the post office was no longer dependent on the old railroad. So, it comes as no surprise that the Canal Zone railway mail service was relegated to the scrap heap of history with its last run of 15 may 1954 – much as was happening to the venerable service throughout the US at the same time.




c1910. The Panama Railroad steamers carried the mails to and from the Isthmus in the days before airmail became routine.